

In an industry famed for precipitous ups and downs, few have gone from penthouse to pavement faster than the Vines. The Sydney band's debut, 2002's *Highly Evolved*, put Australian music on the front burner worldwide and shipped 1.5 million copies. An introductory tour of small venues in the UK had one NME critic nominating The Vines' show in Brighton as "one of the most sensational" debut gigs he had ever seen. Manic Street Preachers front man James Dean Bradfield proclaimed them "absolutely fucking amazing." The album's breakthrough single, "Get Free", hit the UK Top 30, came in at #5 in that year's Triple J Hot 100 and caught the ear of savvy ad-execs looking for a product-friendly rebel anthem.

Album reviews started flooding in. The Times reckoned *Highly Evolved* was based on "a sound so sexy and sludgy that it makes you want to roll around in it." Q Magazine thought that "the Australian quartet's debut album justifies the fuss." The NME was moved to run a full page illustration of Nicholls under the heading "Anatomy of a Rock God", and pondered whether *Highly Evolved* is "the greatest debut album ever." They became the first Australian rock band to make the cover of US Rolling Stone in 20 years.

The Vines were banned from the Triple M playlist "forever". The cumulative effect of all the negative publicity was that the band's sophomore album, *Winning Days*, stalled mid-year after selling a still-impressive 600,000 copies. Bass player Patrick Matthews quit the band, never to return, and the Vines were forced to cancel all touring commitments. Nicholls faced assault charges, underwent psychiatric evaluation and was eventually diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, a neurological condition that leads to difficulties with social interaction and an inability to cope with interruptions to routine. Hardly surprising that the NME's "Anatomy of a Rock God" missed out on that one.

If nothing else, all of the above makes the Vines' third album, *Vision Valley*, a feel-good story of triumph over adversity. Recorded with one eye on the mercurial Nicholls' mental wellbeing, the fact that it's as damned good as it is, is even more remarkable.

"Most people thought the band had broken up," says drummer Hamish Rosser, "so the expectation was zero as far as I'm aware."

Working in a Sydney studio with Australian producer Wayne Connolly (a self-confessed analog "fanatic" who has recorded

recorded at the demo session," says Connolly. "Two takes of vocals and a bunch of percussion on top of the live band track."

But it's not all stripped-down, pared back rock'n'roll. "Spaceship" is the most ambitious track the group has ever attempted, with Nicholls in symphonic Beatles mode. "Craig first played it to me on acoustic and I loved it," says Connolly. "After hearing it with the band I thought it was the one that needed the most work. That's why it took the longest [to record] but now I love it so."

Connolly takes pride in the song's "wild, insane sound... there's a psychedelic fuzz mandolin. There are hundreds of things like that layered in."

"It's a six-minute epic," says Nicholls. "It goes through a lot of different stages. It starts out very mellow acoustic and it ends up space rock. It's pretty interesting, I think."

It makes for a stark contrast with the album's electrifying, you-can't-miss-it track "Gross Out", 77 seconds of sneering punk aggression that could well supplant "Get Free" as the band's anthem and calling card.

"When we're trying to get the track listing in the order of the songs for the album, 'Gross Out' was the song that no-matter



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It was then that critical opinion on the band seemed to erode. The hosannas were initially tempered by Nicholls' reputation for odd or violent outbursts in interviews. Reviews of live shows featuring Nicholls bellowing into the microphone, falling over and smashing his guitars (he broke 57 guitars on consecutive nights) ceased being awestruck descriptions of a tortured genius at work and began to openly question his sanity. "Wilful, dismal, joyless, depressing," complained one critic.

After beginning 2004 with a grueling US tour with Jet, the Vines' tour of Japan was defined by Nicholls abusing the crowd and gigs falling apart as the band worked out their tensions onstage. It came to a head when the Vines tour lurched into Sydney for a Triple M sponsored gig at the Annandale Hotel. You know the story: insults were thrown, kids were dispersed, cameras smashed, charges laid and

you, I, Underground Lovers and Youth Group among others. Nicholls, Rosser and Ryan Griffiths (guitar, keyboards), worked simply and quickly - no big production values, no hours of overkills.

Connolly's relaxed style would prove to be as helpful as his expert ear. After fraught sessions in Los Angeles during the recording of the previous album, it was important for a new protocol to be established if anything fit for release was ever going to make it to tape. Ryan Griffiths says that Connolly's presence at the sessions was "almost therapeutic - he could calm things down, but he also has a good punk ethic."

"We commenced the demo sessions in May of last year at Velvet Studios and recorded seven songs," says Connolly. "In fact the first two songs from the album, 'Anybody' and 'Nothin's Comin'', are from the original sessions."

Likewise *Futurstarbust*. "It's basically a mix of what we

where it went in the album, just leapt out at about 100 miles an hour," says Rosser.

With the band's touring and promotional schedule strictly curtailed to accommodate Nicholls' needs, *Vision Valley*, more than any other major release of recent times, will have to stand or fall on the quality of its songs and whether it can connect with an audience who may never see the album performed live.

So far, the word is positive. Even before the album's release, the NME trumpeted, "They're back!" in a review of the first single off the album, "Don't Listen to the Radio", adding that Nicholls is "back to full songwriting fitness."

Fingers crossed...

Who: The Vines

What: *Vision Valley*, out now through EMI / Capitol